

## Lankes: Little Known Artist of NACA

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The artwork of Julius John Lankes, known as J. J., can be found in various places across NASA Langley Research Center, if you know what to look for.

Lankes was born in Buffalo, New York in 1884, and moved to the Hampton Roads area in 1925. He was recognized for his work as an illustrator and woodcut print artist prior to the move. J. J. worked as a draftsman specializing in patent drawings before continuing his education at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Considering himself to be unsuccessful in painting, Lankes turned to woodblock printing and recorded his first woodcut in 1917. He had produced around 800 paintings up to this time.<sup>1</sup> A pamphlet of his work, *J. J. Lankes: Painter-Graver on Wood*, was published by Bolton Brown in 1921, followed by a book on Lankes' bookplates, written by Wilbur Macy Stone and published by J. J.'s brother Frank in 1922.<sup>2</sup> In 1923, Lankes started a friendship and artistic collaboration with Robert Frost. Lankes produced woodcuts to illustrate his poems as well as works by several other writers including Beatrix Potter. Public collections of Lankes' work are now at numerous locations, including Dartmouth College, Mead Art Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Virginia State Library, and the Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William and Mary.

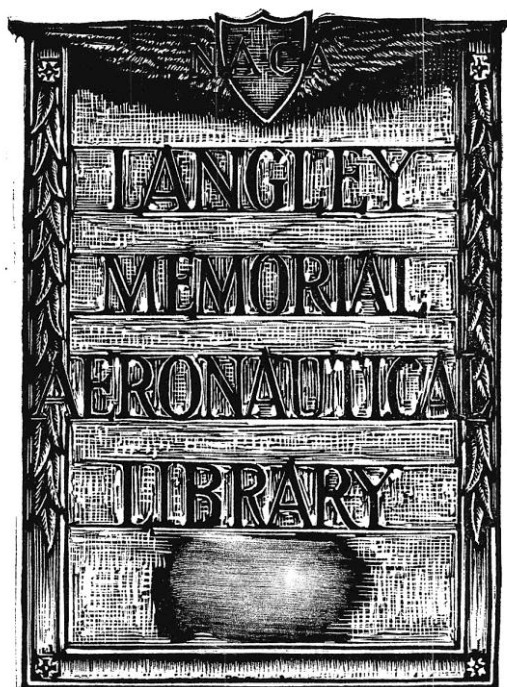


Figure 1 Bookplate for use in the LMAL library.

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<sup>1</sup> A Short J.J. Lankes Biography. Undated. Swan Library.

<sup>2</sup> Library of Virginia. (<http://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/prints/>).

Upon arriving in Newport News, Virginia, in 1925 Lankes settled with his family in Hilton Village, first at 218 Palen Avenue and later at 306 River Road. Living in Hilton Village seemed to bring out the best in his artwork. He produced around 1300 woodblock prints, as well as illustrations for commercial production. *The Woodcut Manual*, recently reprinted by the University of Tampa, was a folio-sized volume of 25 prints depicting rural Virginia scenes. Some of his woodcuts of Pennsylvania Dutch barns were published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*.

Although Lankes was succeeding in his art career, the country was going through difficult times. The Roaring Twenties were followed by the Great Depression, stretching from 1930 to as late as the middle 1940s and the start of WWII. Personal income fell and unemployment rose as high as 25%. It was in this environment that Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal policies were in full swing. Our country's entry into WWII eliminated the last effects of the Depression with the massive war spending. The War also had dramatic impacts on NACA, and research often meant running two shifts.

Lankes joined the staff of NACA in 1943 as the head of technical illustrating. The July 3<sup>rd</sup> issue of the *LMAL Bulletin* announced that J. J. Lankes, well-known artist of Hilton Village, would be instructing college graduates to prepare figures for the use in technical reports. The graduates were described as all women who majored in art, coming from the University of Kentucky, University of North Carolina, Columbia University, and Farmville State Teacher's college.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2 1948 Christmas Party. Inscription on back “technical illustrating and reproduction departments with bosses and the ‘big chief’ Mr. Lankes” (head of Reproduction). Lankes is in upper right. Photo provided by Lankes family.

<sup>3</sup> LMAL Bulletin, Issue 11, Vol2. July 3-9, 1943.

Lankes immediately used his expertise in woodcut prints to design the Center Director's Christmas greeting in the December LMAL Bulletin followed by the New Year Greeting in January.



Figure 3 Christmas and New Year's Greetings from the Center Director included woodcut prints by Lankes.

A few other glimpses into the life of J. J. Lankes at work can be found in the LMAL newsletters. The Charles Bruning Company accepted a wood engraving of Independence Hall at the time the famous tower was added as the 7<sup>th</sup> in a series of Christmas cards produced by their company.<sup>4</sup> Lankes, 'one of the most outstanding woodcut artists of the country' exhibited a group of his works in the hallway of the LMAL Administration Building (587) in April 1945. The same announcement notified NACA employees that Lankes also had a permanent exhibit at the Virginia Institute of Fine Arts.<sup>5</sup>

War-time publications for the Center were also graced with Lankes artwork. In June 1944, NACA issued a special publication defining the purpose of the center saying "Under war condition, the NACA confines its experimental investigations to those requested by the Army and Navy and to fundamental research relating to war problems." Besides a public transportation map of the Lower Peninsula of Virginia drawn by Lankes, a view of the Center was the top banner of the publication. It apparently was given to new employees as the first page includes a block with a person's name written in, and the encouragement that "This booklet has been prepared to help you get acquainted with the Laboratory and the

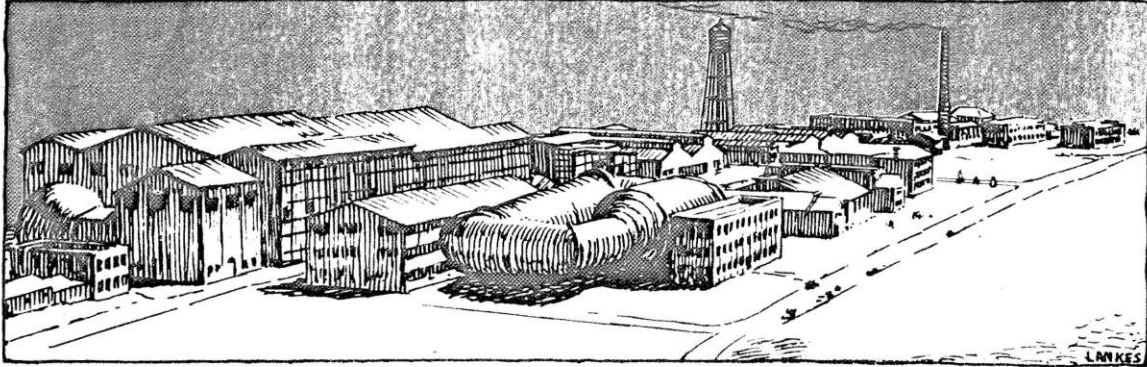
<sup>4</sup> LMAL Bulletin, Issue 5, Vol 3. January 29-February 4, 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Air Scoop, Issue 16, Vol 4. April 20, 1945. Records for the Virginia Institute of Fine Arts, now the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, show that Lankes was on exhibit February 17-March 11, 1945.



Community. We hope you will find your associations here pleasant and thus will be better able to serve the N.A.C.A in its important war work. Welcome!" signed HJE Reid.<sup>6</sup>

# NACA-LMAL AND YOU



NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR AERONAUTICS, LANGLEY FIELD, VA.

Figure 4 June 1944 banner on publication for new employees. The publication also contained a public transportation map for the area drawn by Lankes.

Lankes made big news in the fall of 1945. A full article in the Air Scoop detailed the conception and execution of four murals depicting the history of flight. The murals were to be hung in the rotunda of the Administration Building (587). By 1949, Center Director Dr. H. J. E. Reid was using the rotunda as the location for special events. Photographs of two awards given in the year show the murals as the backdrop.



Figure 5 Harry Lyons receives the first Meritorious Service Emblem and Beth Walker accepted Dr. Reid's contribution to the Red Cross campaign. Both photos were taken in 1949.

<sup>6</sup> NACA-LMAL and You, June 1944. ([http://crgis.ndc.nasa.gov/crgis/images/d/de/1944-06\\_NACA-LMAL\\_and\\_you.pdf](http://crgis.ndc.nasa.gov/crgis/images/d/de/1944-06_NACA-LMAL_and_you.pdf)).

The original design and supervision of the four paintings was by Lankes and executed by Lee Wade. In an interview, Lankes indicated the original idea of murals was during the heyday of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of Roosevelt's New Deal programs. He further stated that a competition had been announced for mural designs, but the work at NACA was not deemed appropriate for the WPA projects.<sup>7</sup> Since the WPA and its various successors ran from 1933 to 1942<sup>8</sup>, it is likely that the idea of the murals was based on the Federal Art Project murals, but that the NACA project was never considered for the federal program. True to the spirit of the WPA projects in which workers received little money but great pride in pursuing their dreams, Lankes used lull time to work on the murals.

The proposed panels would span the history of flight, from the early, 'whimsical flights of the imagination' to the contemporary time with contributions made by NACA. As the design for the third panel was nearing completion in 1945, Lee Wade joined that staff. His experience in painting led to his taking the lead in transforming the water colors Lankes had prepared into the final oil and canvas murals.



Figure 6 Detail of 'whimsical flights of the imagination.'

The murals were large, roughly 7 feet wide by 5 feet tall. The 4<sup>th</sup> panel had been particularly trying as any aircraft they painted would have been 'old' by the time the painting was completed. The final design includes an aircraft carrier deck just visible in the lower right corner.

<sup>7</sup> Air Scoop, Issue 44, Vol 4. November 16, 1945.

<sup>8</sup> New Deal Cultural Programs: Experiments in Cultural Democrat. Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard. 1995. ([www.wwcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html](http://www.wwcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html))

The murals were removed from the rotunda in 1977 when the building was turned over to Langley Air Force Base. Kept in storage for a number of years, they are now on loan to the National Institute of Aeronautics in Hampton, Virginia.



**Figure 7** Granddaughters Jeanie and Elizabeth Lankes pose with two of the panels.

Two years after the murals were unveiled, a related article appeared in the *Air Scoop*. A booklet, *A Brief History of Aeronautics*, was being distributed to all employees. This pamphlet was written by Lankes and printed in the NACA Mechanical Reproduction Section. The purpose was to provide a description of each individual image in the panels. The introduction attributes the design and supervision of the four murals to Lankes with the execution by Lee Wade, Francis McVay, and Harry DeVoto.<sup>9</sup>

The work of J. J. Lankes appeared one final time in the *Air Scoop* of late October 1948. A design competition was instituted for meritorious service emblems. These emblems would be presented to civil servants upon completion of 20 years or more of service. Lankes submitted a design, but it was not selected for the final emblem.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Air Scoop*, Issue 17, Vol 6. May 2, 1947.

<sup>10</sup> *Air Scoop*, Issue 43, Vol 7. October 28, 1948.





Figure 8 Lankes, design submittal for the 20-year meritorious service emblem.

Lankes was not entirely satisfied with his work at NACA. Due to the times and the secretive nature of research at NACA, much of the work done by the technical artists was either for illustrations or was designated confidential. In a letter to a Mr. Fraser, Lankes complained that “there is a magnificent lot of good material to be had here if only it weren’t forbidden, everything we do here is confidential or secret, consequently no sketching is permitted except as pertains to illustration for engineers’ reports.”<sup>11</sup> Welford Taylor, in *The Woodcut Art of J.J. Lankes*, states “pay was steady, but the work – much of it reminiscent of the technical drawing he had done as a young man – was far from creative.”<sup>12</sup>

Lankes considered himself fired for political reasons when dismissed in 1950. He explains in a letter to Rockwell Kent that he had met with a lawyer to get his job back, but was told that he had been fired “as a communist.”<sup>13</sup> Welford Taylor writes that “dismissal from NACA in 1950 is no better documented than his termination from Wells [college teaching position],” but suggests that bureaucratic politics were involved, with Lankes confessing to “some strong language with Civil Service sewer sleuths.”<sup>14</sup>

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was established in 1938 to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive activities. It was chaired by Martin Dies Jr. and hence known as the Dies Committee. In 1946, they focused their efforts on the possibility of the American Communist Party’s infiltration of the WPA. It was a time when headlines screamed about “red artists.”

Lankes had a history of association with organizations that were under scrutiny. His first opportunity as an illustrator had been with Max Eastman and *The Liberator*. An advertisement for the subscriptions and bound volumes included “Where else could one find in the same volume such an intriguing

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<sup>11</sup> Email from Elizabeth Lankes to Mary Gainer, August 29, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> *The Woodcut Art of J.J. Lankes*. Welford Dunaway Taylor. 1999. pg 34.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Woodcut Art of J.J. Lankes*. Welford Dunaway Taylor. 1999. pg. 34.

combination as Lankes' woodcuts, Clive Weed's portraits and Gropper's funny humans!"<sup>15</sup> The Marxists Internet Archive Riazanov Library Project has scanned the *The Liberator*. An introduction to the digital collection includes Lankes as one of the finest artists of the day. That notoriety may have in deed followed him to Hampton, Virginia.

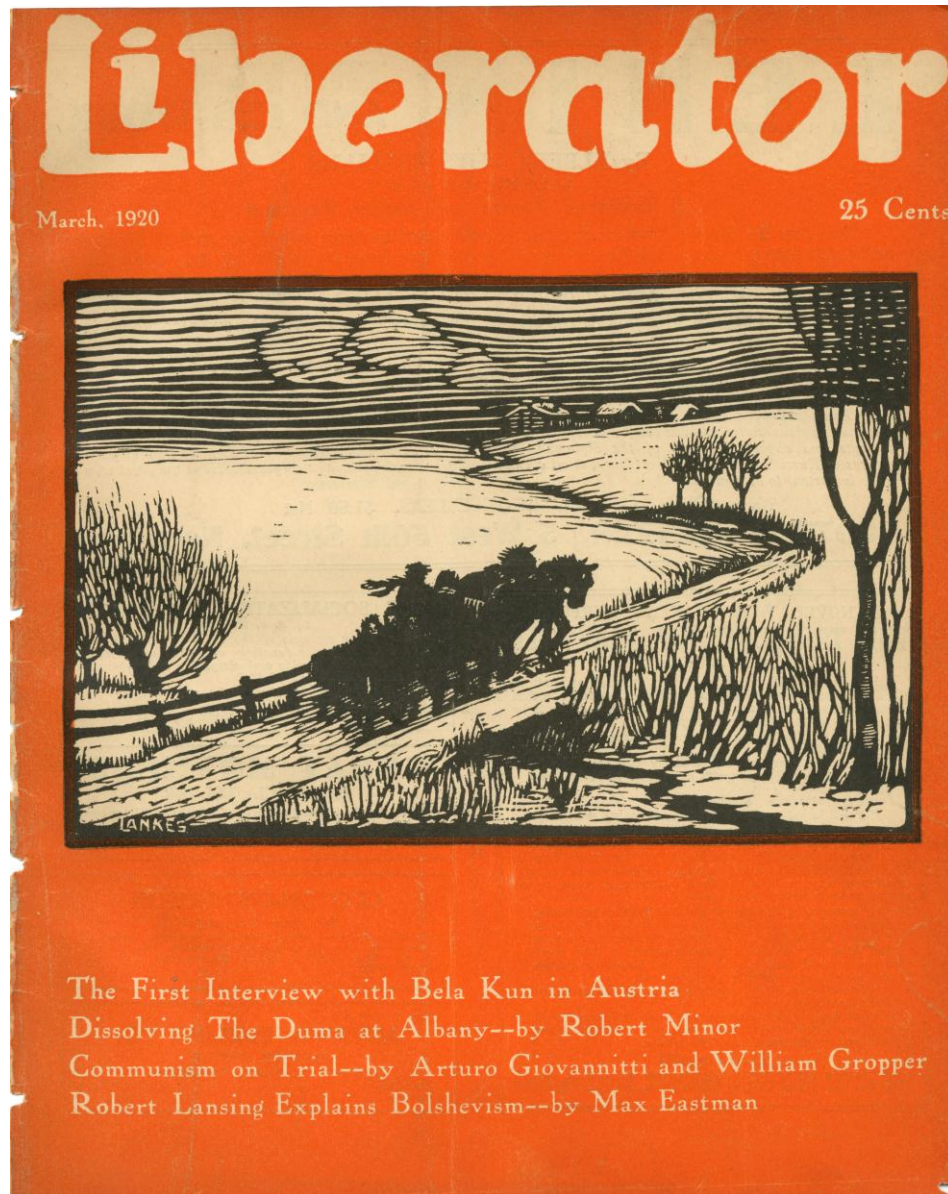


Figure 9 March 1920 cover *Liberator* with Lankes woodcut.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Marxists Internet Archives. *Liberator*, 22 January 1920, pg 44. Transcription/Markup: Brian Baggins. Digitization: Marty Goodman, The Riazanov Library Project. Public Domain under Creative Commons Common Deed. <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/culture/pubs/liberator/>.

<sup>16</sup> Marxist Internet Archive.



In 1951, Lankes moved to Durham, North Carolina. Suffering a stroke in 1959, he died in April 1960.

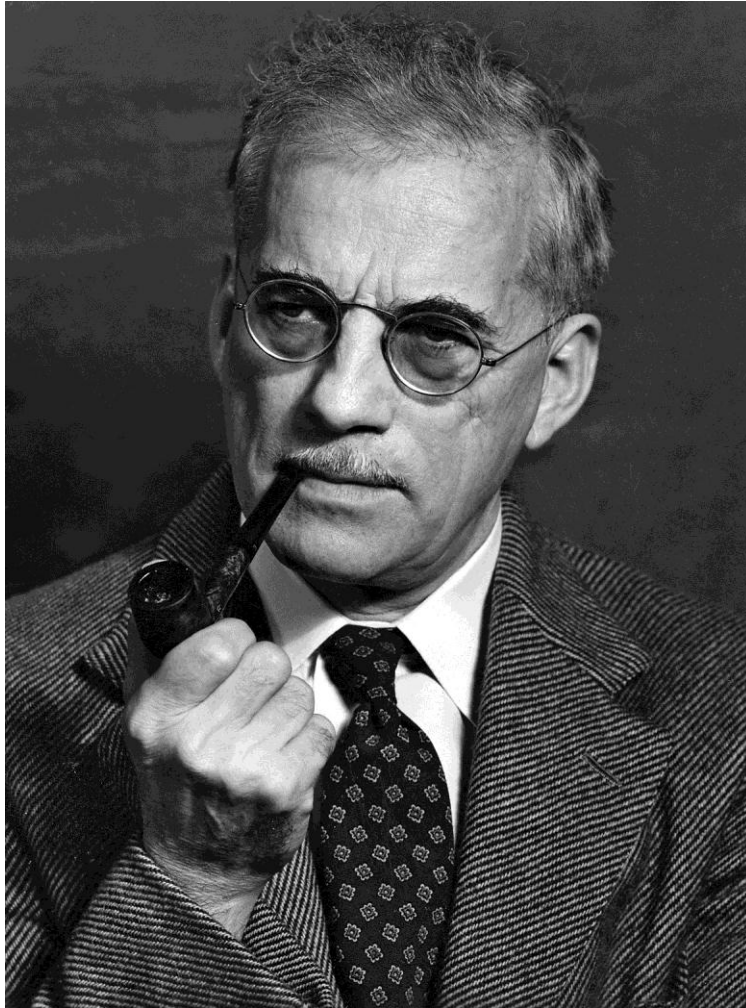


Figure 10 NACA Portrait, 1946